

## **6 Reforming our church services – a positive proposal**

We should not be afraid of the challenge of reform. The world is constantly changing, and fresh questions (or old questions in fresh ways) will always arise. We do not need to fear, because the Bible is the Word of God and is sufficient for every challenge. Rather, we need to rise to meet challenges, and to bring to the Bible the questions that are raised. We need to keep reviewing our answers as we see the responses and progress of our people to our initial attempts. The idea of reform is only a problem if we imagine, or want others to imagine, that we have already arrived at perfection – see Philippians 3:12-15. Here, and in other places, the Bible itself teaches us to expect the need for this continual re-assessment relative to our situations (e.g. 1 Corinthians 9:12).

There are people in Scripture who believed that their approach was almost the final goal. They are the Pharisees, and we are not encouraged to copy their outlook!<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, we find regularly that godly men in Scripture were reformers, continually seeking to get rid of damaging weeds and plant purer seed; men such as Hezekiah, Josiah, Daniel and Paul - and supremely Jesus himself.

### **The old and the new**

There is a continual pattern in the Bible of an old arrangement “growing old” and “wearing out”, and needing to be torn down and replaced with something better (Hebrews 8:13). This kind of talk applies primarily to covenantal shifts; for example, the “old world” of the flood was washed away and Noah walked out into a renewed creation (2 Peter 3:5-13); Jesus came to rebuke the Pharisaical corruptions and purge the temple, ultimately forming a New Covenant and new temple around himself (John 2:19, Matthew 5:17-21, Hebrews 8:8).

The New Covenant is final, waiting only for its ultimate consummation with Jesus' return, and there was and is no question of Paul or anyone else superseding it. Nevertheless, it is a fact of history that the world has changed and progressed since the time that Jesus ascended and began to send forth his power to the earth's ends. It is a fact that Christianity has taken different outward shapes and forms, and not simply amongst people heading in wrong directions but also amongst godly men, as successive ages have received more light and been able to combine the cumulative insights of the past with new answers to new challenges. Our job is not to exactly re-implement the Reformers' or Puritans' or revivalists' responses to their situations, or copy what was done by labourers of the 1970s or 1990s, but to address the situation as we find it in our own day, building on what is good, and replacing what is no longer so or never was. The principle that one outward settlement can “grow old” and need updating can hold true, even under the New Covenant.

In a previous paper I have identified some reasons why I think our church services need reforming. In this paper I want now to spell out positively some ideas for reform. I am not offering them as a definitive or final answer to the issues raised, or a “one size fits all” solution. There are some reforms that I do think should apply generally – such as a weekly Lord's Supper being given a central place in the church's Lord's Day worship. But mostly I am thinking of churches trying to reach Kenya's majority, the poor, and who see the need in their context for churches that cut across social divisions and empower gifted poor people to be effective for the gospel without implying any need or desire to re-configure their social situation, for example training them in the ways of the culturally-foreign middle-class, etc. Before we come to this, one other matter needs some discussion.

### **Who are church meetings for?**

One issue that underlies various others is the question of who our church meetings are designed for.

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<sup>1</sup> My understanding of the situation in Acts 7 and Stephen's speech there is that one of his main points was to refute the idea that the physical temple in Jerusalem was the final form of God's plan for the world.

If participation becomes more open, the question comes - "Should we let any person who comes in speak to the church?" Or, "If we do not restrict reading the Bible or praying to a pre-chosen list, how will we stop anyone just taking over and leading the church?" Or, "If the Lord's Supper is the centre of the service, won't this make unbelievers and other visitors unwelcome?"

I think this issue is actually simple. We already hold meetings for believers only, such as the Lord's Supper and "business meetings". And when we are at business meetings, people instinctively realise that it should be the more spiritually minded members, and those who are leading the way in taking on practical work and labour for the Lord, who should speak most and whose voices should be granted the most weight. This does not mean that this is what always happens! But people do at least implicitly realise that if someone tries to dominate inappropriately, then those who are spiritually minded (and especially the chosen elders) should intervene with a timely, gracious and yet clear word.

So, my answer is that the worship services of the church should be for the church, and we should not even try to design them to be suitable for others. God did not design the Old Covenant tabernacle for visitors to be spectators of, but for priests to serve in. At present, our Lord's Supper services are designed for the church, but our worship services are designed to be generally suitable for all. We have evangelistic hopes for them. Of course we expect that believers will benefit the most from the readings, prayers, preaching, etc. But as all that the believers are generally called upon to do is sit, stand, sing and say "Amen", nothing more is asked of them than is asked of the first-time visitor and complete outsider to the faith. Is that not odd? Should we not at least ask ourselves if it should really be so?

The Bible shows that unbelievers and outsiders did come into the "ordinary" (regular, normal) meetings of the church (1 Corinthians 14:23-25). There is no suggestion that they should be excluded or unconsidered welcome – rather, Paul holds out the hope of their conversion. Nevertheless, we should note that neither were they expected to behave as participants alongside the church; Paul envisages them as watching, listening and learning whilst (as we see throughout 1 Corinthians 12-14), the members of the church minister to each other. I would suggest, then, that if the church allows guests in these meetings, then it does so in a way that is appropriate: they come by invitation (of a member) only, and someone leading the meeting explains in a tactful way that whilst they are welcome to see and hear what is done, as they are not a member of the church they should refrain from speaking.

The answer, then, is that church worship meetings should be configured with the expectation that they are especially for believers, with believers participating in a way that unbelievers do not and cannot. Evangelistic preaching for the unconverted is important, and we should arrange meetings for that too. My own suggestion is that that should be done every Sunday; there can be a believers' fellowship meeting which is not publicly advertised, and a gospel preaching meeting which is advertised vigorously. Then should then be no confusion or embarrassment; people will know what they are invited to and what they can expect, and those teaching can know where to aim their presentation. Of course believers' children should be welcome at worship meetings.

## **Some benefits of this division**

This division between meetings will clear up some other issues. The New Testament commands us, "Those that sin, rebuke before all" (1 Timothy 5:20). We find it embarrassing to follow this command in an all-comers' meeting; we instinctively question if it is appropriate. We can only do it at specially-called meetings, and then in turn we need the extra rules in our constitutions about calling such meetings. Either that, or Kenyan pastors (I have learnt this from my Bible college students!) do simply go ahead and humiliate someone in public, bringing damage to the church's witness and to the humiliated member.

Again, Matthew 18:17 tells us to "tell it to the church" about certain sins (specifically those that a

brother has refused to listen about with just yourself alone, and then with two or three witnesses). When are we meant to do this? Is the only Biblical way to do this to put it in writing and request a special “business meeting”? If so, then this again needs codifying in the church constitution. But did Jesus really have all this in mind when he spoke those words to his disciples, and would they have understood that idea? Is it apparent in the text of the chapter? Is such an approach not simply one possible, culturally Western, approach, that may not be the best in other contexts? On the other hand, if the brethren sat round the Lord's Table each week, and were able to speak freely (guided and overseen by spiritually mature leaders, of course), is that not a much more natural way for someone to speak about matters that they have tried to deal with privately, and now wish to bring to the church?

Having looked at this issue, let us now move on to my positive proposal.

## A suggested model for a church meeting

1 Corinthians 12-14 gives us insights into meetings of the early church in Corinth. Reading those chapters needs care. There was plenty that they were doing wrong and which Paul rebuked them for, which we must not copy. There were also activities (such as tongues and prophecies) that belonged to the age of the apostles, before the written revelation was completed and all-sufficient for the needs of the church. We cannot repeat those things even if we want to.

Working through these issues, nevertheless a picture emerges. As believers made their way to the church meeting, they considered their contribution and went ready to make it. “Every one of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification” (1 Corinthians 14:26). There were free opportunities for believers to minister with their gifts, but this freedom – as all true freedom is – was limited by certain rules and principles. A main principle was edification – the building up of the whole body. A rule which Paul then derived was that those who spoke must do so in an orderly way: in sequence, one after the other, and with limits on the number of speakers (in Paul's context, two or three tongues speakers, and two or three prophets, 1 Corinthians 14:29-31)<sup>2</sup>.

Another rule was that no woman could speak at all in any manner that could suggest giving or guiding teaching, and this included even asking questions (1 Timothy 2:11-15, 1 Corinthians 14:34-37). If they “led” the church in prayer, then they were to cover their heads as a sign that they were in submission (1 Corinthians 11:2-16). I have never in Kenya heard these latter verses employed with any specific application. (We teach female submission, but Paul's point was that this submission should have a visible sign). Since our services are pre-planned, with participation only from male leaders (whether a church officer, or not), these verses are redundant; the question of a woman leading the church in prayer never arises on the Lord's Day.

This is somewhat of an aside; the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is a complicated matter. Nevertheless, I believe the question of why we find so few *particular* applications to how we run our services in the chapters 1 Corinthians 11-14, beyond “good order” in general, is a relevant one.

## The rough picture

The picture which we have, then, is roughly this. The local church has (or should have!) spiritually gifted leaders, men, who are responsible to guide and direct the meeting, providing oversight, leading in prayer and teaching. They are responsible to make sure that whatever is said is for

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2 Some interpreters have read these verses as saying that if someone was prophesying and somebody else was given a revelation by the Spirit and wished to start, then the first prophet should allow himself to be interrupted, and then resume afterwards. This interpretation is not necessary, and in the overall context of Paul's argument for order, is incredible. If the spirits of the prophets are under the control of the prophets (14:32), then that means that such interruptions were categorically *not* necessary. When Paul said “let the first hold his peace” (v30, KJV), the words mean, “allow the first one to finish”.

edification, and does not contravene any Biblical instructions. Within this context, every believer is free to contribute by praying (by giving thanks, worship and supplications), proposing hymns, and all believing men are free to contribute by reading the Scriptures, giving words (of whatever length) of teaching, exhortation, encouragement or rebuke. It is very appropriate if someone has made a particular study of the Bible to bring a prepared “sermon”. People can share (as equals) news of their particular ministries to the Lord and have them prayed for. If this is done then the common and dangerous assumption that ministry is mainly the work of professional leaders will be avoided. It may be that quite naturally within this context, particular matters come up and are resolved. People should be welcome to ask questions during the teaching, which was a Biblical practice (implied in 1 Corinthians 14:35). Throughout this whole time, unbelievers would be welcome to observe, but not to speak, because it is a *church* meeting. Anyone who has been excommunicated from the fellowship would not be welcome at all and should be shunned. This is another Biblical practice and teaching which seems to have fallen upon hard times once the church's worship meetings became considered “public” meetings, and which needs reviving (2 Thessalonians 3:14).

## Communion

Then, the meeting will make its way (guided by the spiritual leaders) towards the Lord's Supper. Attention will be increasingly drawn to the life, death, resurrection and ascension of the Son of God, and the New Covenant we have in him. Our sinfulness and the full perfection of Jesus' death for us should increasingly become the dominant thought. In this setting (where the Communion service is not following an uninterrupted liturgy), there is a natural opportunity for brethren to “confess [their] faults to one another” (James 5:16), and for any matters of sin that have not been cleared up after witnesses have come in to be brought to the church (Matthew 18:16-18). Where matters are not cleared up during this time, any accused brothers can be asked to stand back from the Supper, along with anyone who has been suspended. The terribleness of exclusion from gospel fellowship is then visibly seen, and a clear warning is sounded to all believers for their benefit, and offenders have a means of leading them towards repentance.

One practical question arises here: what about any unbelievers who are present, especially if some matter of church discipline needs to be dealt with? Firstly, under my proposal such presences would be exceptions, not the norm. If the meeting is not publicly advertised, unknown members of the public would not be expected or welcome – they would not fit in such a meeting, which is intended to be a family gathering. Outsiders would come as invited acquaintances of church members, perhaps visiting relatives or contacts who are seeking. The members would need to exercise wisdom; if the gathering is clearly a family gathering as opposed to a public meeting, then this should be fairly readily understood. If any difficult or controversial matters arise, the church might naturally ask them to step aside whilst they are dealt with – just as would happen in a flesh-and-blood family situation. Of course, as I am trying to make practical suggestions here and not claiming to lay down the law of the Medes and Persians (Daniel 6:8), the church might simply decide it is simpler not to allow visitors, or not those who are not members in good standing of another gospel church, at all.

Moving back to the subject of the Supper again, 1 Corinthians 11 shows us that the Corinthians regularly combined it with a fellowship meal, which is appropriate. The Corinthians did so abusively and Paul had to teach them to ensure that the Lord's Supper was not degraded. Nevertheless he did not require them to end the practice of the “love feast”; he commanded them against coming to greedily over-eat or to get drunk (v34), but he allowed them to continue the shared meal by saying, “when you come together to eat, wait for one another” (v33). This is a permission, not a command; again, the church is responsible to keep order and maintain the dignity of divine worship.

The Lord's Supper ends with the thought of “until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26), and this provides an appropriate conclusion to the meeting. Through the Supper, symbolically and actually,

sin has been identified and confessed, fellowship has been restored and renewed, and believers are commissioned again to “go into all the world”, to advance the kingdom of God and the gospel of Christ.

## **In summary**

To boil it down now very simply, a church meeting should have all the repeated elements of true worship: prayer, sung praise, reading of the Scriptures, teaching from God's Word, and the Lord's Supper (and baptism, if there are candidates). Other commandments made to the whole church in the Bible, about rebukes, confessions, discipline, mutual encouragement and prayer can also be carried on naturally in this setting. But the setting is emphatically one of equal brethren coming around the Lord's Word and Table to fellowship together, with each using their different but equally necessary gifts. It is an end of the culture (whether explicit or implicit) where the minister is the exalted leader and the people are defined as (his) followers.

## **Some advantages**

When this is done, I think the need for other meetings will be much reduced. Sensing some of the weaknesses which the traditional style of meeting has, those in our and similar circles have looked for remedies. We have a prayer meeting mid-week when anyone can pray (and I am not suggesting stopping this). We have extra business meetings to deal with other matters in the church, in particular members' misbehaviour (which then becomes seen tacitly as unusual and shocking, rather than something dealt with routinely through confession, repentance and restoration, as a normal feature of church life). We schedule in a monthly Lord's Supper to fulfil the requirement for the regular observance of that Ordinance. We then need fairly lengthy – and, to the lower classes, incomprehensible – constitutions to codify how all of this will be carried out. A lot would of this would be redundant if we reformed in the direction I have suggested. The problem of the strangeness and inaccessibility – especially to poorer, uneducated believers – of the “church business meeting” would largely melt away.

## **Challenges**

One response which could arise against proposals of this kind is fear. There is always the fear of change, of course; but I am thinking of another sort. If we allow this kind of liberty – this kind of freedom – to “ordinary” church members, then what might the results be? We might lose control of the church; anything could happen. Members could openly express their immaturity, and all kinds of unhelpful foolishness and embarrassments might come into our church meetings.

My answer is: indeed they might. When they do, we can and should deal with them. As we read the letters of Paul, we find all sorts of problems and sins loose in the churches to which he wrote. Yet we never find that Paul's solution was to clamp down. The spirit of restricting and adding new rules and personal commands to ensure that such embarrassments should never happen, does not appear in his letters. Paul was a minister of the New Covenant, and dealt with the heart (2 Corinthians 3:6). The “solution” of adding new rules only brushes real issues under the carpet, when it would be better simply to address them. It also brings its own evils. Freedom is necessary for growth. Growth brings challenges, but clamping down on the freedom clamps down on the growth as well as on the challenges.

There can also be the fear that the minister will be exposed. In Africa, and in Kenya particularly, ministers should, according to popular belief, have great abilities and powers. Sadly, too many would go to great lengths to maintain this appearance. If meetings involved more open back-and-forth between the brethren, then they might be exposed. Or their pride might simply not allow this kind of equality. Or they might be very humble men, but be unable to deal with all that might arise through the members' contributions. Again, all I can say is: “so be it”. If we only expose and see

reality, then spiritually we have not lost anything. A minister may need to return to his Bible, his books and his colleagues to get answers for next week; is that a real problem? Surely it is better to allow the freedom for blunders and then deal with them, rather than to clamp down so that there are neither blunders nor the opportunities they bring.

## **The fork in the road**

The fork in the road on one hand is that we must trust for God all the issues that will arise. It is to believe that, through the Spirit of God in God's people and through our prayers and pastoral labours – which may have to be much more intense than before – the people will grow and the growth will ultimately be overseen and guided by Christ for his kingdom's advance. Or on the other fork, we can make sure that less happens that would make life too awkward or embarrassing, and in doing so make sure that not much happens at all. We can choose that people remain in their culturally-assumed roles, learning to be mostly passive receivers from the privileged few ministers, and have their gifts under-developed and under-used. That is something to really fear. It is also a situation which sadly we know as reality, whether you agree with me about some of the contributing causes or not.

It is an unfortunate reality that in our cultural setting, many believers do not and will not come to midweek meetings. If they are professionals, then they are not home from work (because our meetings are early due to insecurity). If they are poor, they may still be trying to earn their daily bread, and perhaps engaged in a job that they only secured an hour earlier; or simply they work somewhere where terrible traffic prevents them. In the UK it is common to arrange other meetings, formal or informal, to make sure there is no lack. These can be “after-service” fellowships, or believers' “experience meetings”, or the like; but it is much harder to establish these as meetings for a significant portion of a church in Kenya, and a “church within the church” can develop. A significant proportion of believers are only rarely present at a meeting where they are allowed to pray or share something from the Scriptures. Their growth is then stunted.

## **An outline**

Having given my suggestions and considered some responses and challenges, I want to conclude with a basic, condensed outline of my suggestion for the church's Sunday ministry:

- The Sunday evangelistic meeting: this is devoted to preaching the gospel and answering questions from hearers. Prayer, singing and reading the Bible would feature only as supporting aids as appropriate depending on the audience (i.e. on the cultural setting, and how acceptable/accessible these things are). This meeting is publicly advertised and open to all. It could look much like a traditional church service, if that is what would be most accessible to the outsiders it was aimed at.
- Sunday worship meeting: this is a meeting of the church, not publicly advertised, at which the unconverted are welcome, but only to observe (if the church allows), not participate. Believers are free, as appropriate, to share the Word (with someone in particular expected to have prepared a more detailed sermon), to pray, encourage, bring hymns and songs, etc. The meeting is guided by the church's spiritual leaders, leading eventually towards the climax of the Lord's Supper which also brings an opportunity to deal with any matters of discipline and any particular brotherly rebukes or exhortations which the church's leaders believe are appropriate.

I believe that this proposal deals with various New Testament verses that our present practice finds difficult to explain. I believe that it does not contradict any Biblical commands or recommendations, and that it is fully compatible with the 1689 Second London Baptist confession. I commend it as a positive step forward which will help us to meet various challenges and problems arising from our present practice.